A Venetian Vignette One Hundred Years after Marco Polo

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Dedicated to Joan and Paul Bernard

Among the many remarkable objects shown in the exhibition “Venice and the Islamic World 828–1179,” held at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, and the Metropolitan Museum in 2006–7, was an illustration in Li livres du Graunt Caam (The Book of the Great Khan), a manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (MS Bodley 264) that is a copy of a fourteenth-century French prose text illuminated in Paris (British Library, Royal 19 D.I.).1 The Bodleian manuscript is one of some one hundred fifty known versions, in Franco-Italian, Tuscan, Venetian, German, Latin, and French, made in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from the lost text of the famous Travels of Marco Polo, also called Il milione (A Million) or Le livre des merveilles (The Book of the Marvels).2 The splendid illumination on folio 218r of Bodleian 264 (Figure 1), frequently reproduced but rarely discussed in detail, depicts the departure of the young Marco Polo, his father, Niccolò, and his uncle Maffeo from Venice in 1271.3 The miniature can be ascribed to an English master who signed the miniature on folio 220 of the manuscript Johannes me fecit. The style suggests a date of 1400–1410.

Experienced merchants, the elder Polos had spent several years doing business out of Soldaia (Sudak), on the Crimean coast of the Black Sea (see Figure 2), where they had owned a house since the 1250s.4 Soldaia was a major emporium of Italian, specifically Venetian, traders who exchanged their own Western products—mostly metals, glass, linen, wool, and silk cloth—for raw materials and goods—grains, hides, wax, furs, raw and finished silk, condiments, carpets, slaves—from all over the Mongol realm, from the Golden Horde in the Kipchak steppe to the Ilkhans in Persia to the great commercial centers in Central Asia such as Samarkand and Bukhara.5

In 1260 the Polos were on the move, trading in jewels at Sarai on the Volga, the residence of Berke, Khan of the Golden Horde. They went on to Bukhara, where they stayed for three years because war had broken out between Berke and the Ilkhan Hülegu, both grandsons of Genghis Khan. In Bukhara, they were asked to and did join an embassy from Hülegu to the Great Khan.6 In 1266 the brothers finally reached the Mongol imperial court in Shangdu, where they soon won the confidence of Khubilai (r. 1260–94), yet another grandson of Genghis Khan. Having first occupied northern China, by 1279 Khubilai had wrested the south from the Song Dynasty, reunifying the vast empire and establishing the Yuan Dynasty. In 1269 he entrusted the Polos with a mission to the pope requesting one hundred skilled missionaries, together with oil from the lamp that burned in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.7 Khubilai may have felt the need to engage potent foreign experts, whom he perhaps expected to be magicians, to control the restive country and intimidate his enemies.8 As shamanists, the Mongols’ attitude toward foreign creeds was indifferent; they were concerned only that the various beliefs prove themselves strong and useful for the khan’s purposes. Rather than relying solely on Chinese bureaucrats whose loyalty might be questionable, Khubilai gathered Confucian scholars, Tibetan Buddhists (perhaps the khan’s favorites because of their “expertise in magic”), Daoists, Muslims, Jews, and Nestorians and other Christian denominations at his court and in his administration. The task assigned to the Polos had nothing unusual about it.

Though the Polo brothers were able to use the imperial relay post, the trip back was arduous enough. On reaching the Mediterranean at the port of Layas (in the gulf of Iskenderun, or Alexandretta), they learned that Pope Clement IV had died in November 1268. The brothers decided to wait out the interregnum at home in Venice, but when it lasted ever longer, in 1271 they resolved to return to the Great Khan to apprise him of events. This time, Niccolò’s seventeen-year-old son Marco accompanied them. Gregory X was made pope in 1271, while he happened to be serving.
as archdeacon in Acre in the Holy Land. There the Polos, now on their second voyage, consulted him shortly before his election. They also succeeded in obtaining the oil from the Holy Sepulcher.

It has often been remarked that the bird’s-eye view of Venice depicted in the miniature in the Bodley manuscript (Figure 1) cannot have been based on a personal knowledge of the city but is rather an imaginary reconstruction from hearsay, possibly reports from eyewitnesses or pilgrims, cast in the artistic conventions familiar to an English miniaturist of the early fifteenth century. The two Oriental granite columns bearing the statues of the Eastern saint Theodore the Dragon Slayer, first patron of Venice, and of the winged lion, symbol of Saint Mark, who became the protector of the Serenissima after his relics reached the city, allegedly in A.D. 828, are accurately placed in the piazzetta, quite close to the water’s edge. Yet they do not face the piazzetta as they should, and Saint Theodore appears in the guise of the winged archangel Michael, a figure more familiar to Western viewers. While the positions of the Palazzo Ducale and Saint Mark’s, the state basilica, are fairly exact, their architecture bears no relation to reality. It is only the two arcades—the upper one delicately lacy—that gird the turreted castle and the four bronze horses on the balcony of the adjacent building that signal the identity of the palace and the basilica. Most likely these details were highlighted in the written and painted sources that guided the miniaturist Johannes.

In typical medieval fashion, the leave-taking and departure of the Polos is narrated in sequential scenes. Having left the Piazzetta San Marco via an arched stone bridge, the Ponte della Paglia, the family is shown surrounded by friends on the Riva degli Schiavoni (Figure 3). Young Marco, with short-cropped hair and wearing a cinnabar-colored outfit that includes hose and shoes, stands listening to a group of youths. The white-bearded and hatted man in pale pink, which the catalogue of the 2006–7 exhibition identifies as

2. Soldaia (Sadak), Crimea (Ukraine), view from the north. Photograph: Elfriede R. Knauer

3. Detail of Figure 1
Marco, is in fact Marco’s father, Niccolò. Marco’s uncle Maffeo, who has doffed his hat to reveal his still chestnut hair, is barely visible behind his older brother and can be identified in the group of elderly citizens only by his pale mauve hose and shoes. The young man with a ewer on the bridge may be offering the Polos a farewell cup. The next scene (again, see Figure 3) shows Maffeo in full as the Polos gallantly board a barge across a rickety plank and wave good-bye to their friends, old and young. The threesome is seen for the last time in a cog under full sail leaving the safety of the Canale di San Marco for the open waters in the company of two more ships (Figure 4).

Two more manned cogs and a galley with close-reefed sails are anchored in the canal. Their pennants indicate the direction of the wind that also bellies the sails of the Polos’ vessel and its companions. In the galley’s aft is the customary open cabin of the commander or guest of honor, often, as here, covered with a precious textile. Above this group of vessels, a barge emerges from under the Ponte della Paglia on the Rio di Palazzo, propelled with two oars by a standing hooded figure in gray—a gondoliere avant la lettre. One of the thole-pins, the pole of the oar, and the eddy caused by the blade are visible in the enlarged detail (Figure 3).

At the lower edge of the miniature, just below the anchored ships in what is presumably the Canal Grande and to the left of the little Gothic church in the position of present-day Santa Maria della Salute, is an intriguing device that is never mentioned in the discussions of the scene (see 4. Detail of Figure 1
Wooden stakes have been driven into the mud of the shallow waters to form a circular enclosure with a substantial perch inside, an installation that to my knowledge is unparalleled in Western painting, either of the period or later. In a prominent position and rendered as meticulously as any other object in the miniature, it must have had a purpose that made sense to the illuminator and his audience. The duck and two gulls next to the enclosure are to scale, but the disproportionately large swans that cruise and feed in the canal next to the Polos’ embarkation warn against taking the representation of wildlife in the image too literally.

The low salinity of the upper Adriatic provides ideal living conditions for a multitude of wildlife, fish as well as birds, especially during the migration periods. I propose that the contraption in the miniature is a pen for cormorants, specifically for the great cormorant \textit{(Phalacrocorax carbo)}, a member of the large family Phalacrocoracidae, the only cormorant with a white throat (Figures 5, 6). Excellent divers, swift underwater swimmers, and voracious eaters, these sociable birds thrive in both salt- and sweet-water habitats, and their distribution is almost universal. Because the glands they, like other aquatic fowl, possess to oil themselves with a water-repellent substance are extremely small in cormorants, the birds tend to sink once afloat. Just the necks and heads remain visible, which facilitates diving but every so often requires that they carefully dry their plumage in the sun, with wings spread wide. Cormorants are easily domesticated, but to prevent them from escaping their wings must be clipped and they must be kept in pens either

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\caption{8. Top: Vittore Carpaccio. \textit{Hunting on the Lagoon} (Figure 7). Bottom: Vittore Carpaccio, \textit{Two Venetian Ladies on a Balcony}, ca. 1490–95. Oil on wood, 37 x 25 3/4 in. (94 x 64 cm). Museo Civico Correr, Venice. Photograph: Scala / Art Resource, New York}
\end{figure}
on land or, as our miniature seems to suggest, in watery coops; both methods require their being carried to and from work. Their home in the canal, as shown in the view of Venice in the Bodley manuscript, seems a logical solution, since much of the city’s life did and still does take place afloat.

Another, much better known image of Venetian customs, or rather upper-class diversions, offers a clue to the services domesticated cormorants provide to their masters. Vittore Carpaccio’s *Hunting on the Lagoon* of 1490–95 in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (Figure 7) shows the upper segment of a panel that was discovered to be part of the famous painting *Two Venetian Ladies on a Balcony* at the Museo Civico Correr in Venice (Figure 8). The somewhat enigmatic departure of the youths who stand in the seven barges, each slowly propelled by two oarsmen with a blackamoor steering, was explained only recently. Perched quietly on the edges of the boats are several cormorants, and more of the well-trained birds are in the water, diving and capturing fish (two of which are draped over the prow of one of the boats on the left). To spur the birds’ return aboard and make them disgorge the catch they store in their extendable gullets, the youths hit them with bow-propelled earthenware pellets. The elegant outfits of the young men demonstrate the elite character of the activity. The outing will find its festive conclusion in the reed huts on an island in the marshes of the lagoon seen in the background, where the catch will be consumed, stag party fashion, with no ladies present. On a rooftop terrace in the lower portion of the painting the fair sex waits—visibly bored—for the return of the youth, or at least for a page to deliver a note from them.

What made the correct interpretation of the scene so difficult until now is Carpaccio’s intentional disregard of the messier part of the activity—the emptying of the cormorants’ gullets and the gutting of the catch—which would have seriously disturbed the balance and serenity of his unparalleled painting. For his contemporaries the telescoping of sequential events posed no difficulty; Venetians of the day must have enjoyed the mildly ironic juxtaposition of the activities that Carpaccio’s panel so masterfully reflects. The Getty’s *Fishing with Cormorants* (the painting’s proper title) suggests that before becoming a pastime for the leisure class cormorant fishing must have served a more practical purpose, perhaps not on a commercial scale but to satisfy the needs of families. The contraption shown in the view of Venice that Johannes created to embellish Marco Polo’s *Milione* may provide the answer. The pen in the Canal Grande, as unobtrusive and run-of-the-mill as the women shopping at the butcher’s in the piazza, attests to fishing with cormorants as an accepted and effective way of providing the city with food almost a century before Carpaccio depicted it. But when and from where was it introduced?

The international character of the Mongol empire, where commerce was much encouraged and foreign religions were tolerated, attracted to China not only Western merchants but also Latin Christian missionaries, primarily Franciscans and Dominicans. Promoted by Rome and welcomed early on by the Muslim Ilkhans in Persia, the priests established convents and churches that served the Italian communities and were points of departure for missionary work. An archbishopric was established in Sultania, the capital of the Ilkhans, in 1318. By 1325 colonies of mainly Genoese Italian merchants served by friars and bishops existed in Zaiton (today Quanzhou), Yangzhou, and Hangzhou along the south coast of China. Trans-Asian commercial activities were much curtailed when the Khans of the Golden Horde embraced Islam in the 1340s. Soon after, the Italian emporia and with them the monastic houses at Tana at the mouth of the Don and Caffa, or Feodosiya, on the Crimea (see Figure 9) were wiped out by the Kipchak Khan. At the end of the fourteenth century, Timur’s reign in Persia rang the death knell for many Christian establishments. In China, Kubilai’s successors favored Tibetan Buddhism, and the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty to the Ming in 1368 added to the withering of commercial ties across an increasingly insecure Asia.

Though the so-called Pax Mongolica lasted not much more than a century, the Christian ambassadors and missionaries who undertook the arduous trip to the East, either by land or by sea, left many precious reports on the Mongol realm. Unlike Marco Polo’s *Milione*, which was aimed at a different public, their accounts often evince a modern ethnographer’s acuity. Marco Polo himself never mentions fishing with cormorants. The first known description of the practice was written by the Franciscan Odorico Matiussi,
better known as Odoric of Pordenone (1263–1331), who was buried in Udine and beatified in 1755. A native of Friuli, Odoric visited Persia, India, Central Asia, and China over a period of twelve years and upon his return to Padua in 1330 dictated his *Relatio* to a fellow brother, William of Solagna.

I came to a certain great river, and I tarried at a certain city which hath a bridge across that river. And at the head of the bridge was a hostel in which I was entertained. And mine host, wishing to gratify me, said: “If thou wouldst like to see good fishing, come with me.” And so he led me upon the bridge, and I looked and saw in some boats of his that were there certain water-fowl tied upon perches. And these he now tied with a cord round the throat that they might not be able to swallow the fish which they caught. Next he proceeded to put three great baskets into a boat, one at each end and the third in the middle, and then he let the water-fowl loose. Straightway they began to dive into the water, catching great numbers of fish, and ever as they caught them putting them of their own accord into the baskets, so that before long all the three baskets were full. And mine host then took the cord off their necks and let them dive again to catch fish for their own food. And when they had thus fed they returned to their perches and were tied up as before. And some of those fish I had for my dinner.25

At which city and river Odoric witnessed cormorant fishing is unknown. That his Latin *Itinerary* had already been much copied and translated by early in the fourteenth century—there are Italian, French, and German versions—attests to great contemporary interest. His may not have been the only testimony, however, for after his return he himself mentioned conversations in Venice with people who had also visited China.26 Word of mouth may have contributed to the rapid spread of the efficient new fishing method, and the almost universal distribution of cormorants must have enhanced its acceptance in much of Europe. Yet proof for this assumption comes only from much later sources.27 The hypothesis that the Bodley miniature might be the earliest Western attestation so far of this highly sophisticated and efficient activity may one day be confirmed by other documents. In any case, late medieval works of art, large or small, deserve to be scrutinized more painstakingly for telling realia.

The strange assemblage of beasts shown in the lower left corner of the miniature (see Figure 10) also merits further consideration. Pale brown and gray rocky outcrops define an otherwise lush, wooded promontory. The single trees implausibly perched on the crags recall the highly stylized landscapes in late Byzantine art. Venetian painters persistently adhered to Byzantine models even after Renaissance precepts had already taken root in the city, and this may be yet another hint of the miniaturist relying on images based on Venetian formulas, albeit mediated ones.28 The strangest feature of the scene, greatly blemished by a loss of pigment, is the top part of a nude human figure who seems to be reaching for a fruit in the tree above. Nearby, a pair of lions and a leopard rest peacefully while a huge bird appears to inspect two smaller ones nested in the grass. Unlike other Italian municipalities in the late Middle Ages, Venice is not known to have kept a collection of exotic animals within its territory. Leonardo Olschki has suggested that the creatures may allude to the unexplored regions of the earth the Polos intended to visit, just as on somewhat earlier *mappae mundi* such empty spaces are frequently enlivened with images of predators: *hic sunt leones*.29

Carpaccio’s mysterious *Meditation on the Passion* of about 1510 (Figure 11) is instructive in this regard. Of modest dimensions and clearly a devotional painting, it shows the dead Christ poised on a broken marble throne, flanked by Job on his left and Saint Jerome on his right. The Hebrew inscription engraved on Job’s cubic seat—“but as for me I know that my redeemer liveth” (Job 19.25)—was taken by Jerome in his *Moralia in Job*, written in the Holy Land, as prefiguring the resurrection of Christ. Jerome is shown here in the guise of a hermit. A wealth of iconographical details have been astutely interpreted with respect to their christological allusions. The bird rising behind Christ’s throne is
recognized as portent of his reappearance. Of special interest in this context are the two contrasting landscapes in the background: on the left is a rocky wilderness that looks as though it was at some point converted by man into a burial ground but has since been neglected and taken over by wild animals. A doe grazes on the lowermost outcropping, unaware of the stag being felled by a leopard farther up the cliff, and at the top a wolf lurks in a cave, perhaps the mouth of hell.

On the right of Carpaccio’s painting, in an otherwise serene view of the piedmont, a leopard pursues a deer on the hither side of a brook crossed by a rickety bridge. Beyond the stream is a fortified settlement that could be anywhere in the foothills of the Dolomites, and yet this is the Orient, as only beturbaned figures inhabit the scene. The Holy Land was certainly thought of as the home of wild beasts in late medieval times. Though the leopard was also the favorite status-enhancing participant in the hunts of Islamic and Mongol royalty and their retainers, and Italian artists were perfectly well aware of this fact, Carpaccio endowed these creatures with a symbolism both sinister and redemptive that is rooted in the Bible, specifically in the book of Job. He showed the leopard in pursuit of a stag, the age-old Christian metaphor of the human soul. And the painting must also be seen as symbolic of Christianity at risk of falling prey to the infideels.

It was hardly accidental that in Venice at that time a fresh, intense movement toward a more personal religiosity arose from the unfulfilled yearning for a reformed church, which Rome failed to offer. The “global” perspective of the Venetian merchant aristocracy made the city’s residents more susceptible to the fundamental questions of faith and the human condition raised by ever mounting calamities, as devotional paintings such as Carpaccio’s Meditation on the Passion attest. In the first decade of the sixteenth century, when this panel was most probably painted, the powerful Serenissima was suddenly faced with enormous challenges. She lost the terra firma to the forces of the League of Cambrai that united the German emperor, France, and the pope against her, and the constantly renewed Ottoman attacks menaced her possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean and on the Dalmatian coast.
hopes of those troubled times seem to pervade Carpaccio’s painting.

By contrast, in the Bodley miniature the serene wild beasts on a shaded promontory in company of the First Man appear to reflect a paradisiacal though distant world, the exploration of which held out promise to Italian monks and merchants, both spiritually and materially, in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The promise was owed to the Pax Mongolica, an all too brief interval of relative calm and prosperity.10

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NOTES

3. Carboni et al. 2007, ill. p. 58, cover ill.; Pächt and Alexander 1973, pl. 75. Though the miniature is generally in excellent condition, the loss of pigment has left some jagged white spots.
5. Soldaia (Greek Sougdaia) may have been founded by Sogdian merchants from present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (see La Vaissière 2005, pp. 242–49). According to sixth-century Byzantine sources, Sogdians, endorsed by the West Turkish Khan Istámi, approached the Byzantine court to gain support for the transport of Chinese silk via the northern steppe route, since the Sassanians had blocked the normal passage through Central Asia (see Knauer 2001, especially pp. 134ff.; for the Greek text, see Blockley 1985). The so-called Codex Cumanicus in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice (Cod. Mar. Lat. Zan 549 [1597]), a composite work compiled between the 1290s and the 1350s and apparently begun in a monastery of Saint John outside Sarai, provides a panoramic picture of mercantile and missionary activities in the Kipchak realm and beyond. A West Turkic tribal association, the Cumans/Kipchaks, though under the sovereignty of Berke Khan, dominated the steppes between the Dnjestr and the Don, including the Crimea. It was with them that the merchants and monks had to deal (see Schmieder and Schreiner 2005 and Golden 1992; see also Drimba 1985). The languages recorded in the codex (vocabularies and short texts) are Latin, Cuman, Italian dialects, and a German dialect; Persian, Greek, Slavic, and Mongol elements are also found, reflecting the poly-ethnic origins of the population, specifically of the Crimea. The lingua franca of the Mongol empire was, however, Persian, which Marco Polo may have mastered, though he seems to have remained ignorant of Chinese. For the political history of the region, see Spuler 1965 and also Vásáry 2005. For a detailed study of the relations between the West and China from antiquity to the High Middle Ages, see Reichert 1992, which deals extensively with Marco Polo and other visitors to China. On the slave trade, see note 22 below.
6. For details on the voyage of the brothers, see the second chapter of Larner’s excellent study (1999, pp. 31–45). The famous globe designed by Martin Behaim for the City Council at Nürnberg in 1492 and kept in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum there shows three men in Armenia, perhaps the Polos. Much of the information in Marco’s book has been absorbed into the globe; see Muris 1943 and Willers 1992.
7. This may have been at the request of Khubilai’s Christian wives, and the oil could also have served to work magic, an important aspect of shamanism, which the Mongols practiced. See Larner 1999, p. 35.
8. Peter Jackson (2005, p. 264 and passim) speaks of the khans’ need of “religious specialists.” His article presents an excellent analysis of the complex character of Mongol beliefs and attitudes and the changes that occurred over time.
9. See, for example, the entry on the miniature by Pia Palladino (in Carboni et al. 2007, p. 299, no. 15).
10. The whitish objects the vendor standing between the columns distributes from his large wicker basket are more likely to be rolls than eggs, as they are often described, since he is dropping them into a shopper’s apron.
11. The Ponte della Paglia was constructed in 1360. Compared with the toylike structures of the cityscape, the bridge, built of limestone blocks set in thick beds of mortar, evinces an almost “magic realism.” As a technical feat it may have commanded the attention of visitors and thus found entry into contemporary guidebooks. Olshchik (1937, p. 225) maintains that the bridge in the miniature represents the Ponte di Rialto. As can be seen in Carpaccio’s Miracle of the Relic of the Holy Cross of 1495 (Galleria dell’Accademia, Venice; see Sgarbi 1994, p. 11) and the detail view from Jacopo de’ Barbari’s engraving of 1500 (Carboni et al. 2007, p. 60, fig. 1), however, in the early 1400s the Ponte di Rialto was a wooden drawbridge that parted at the center to allow the passage of the doge’s sumptuous boat, the bucentoro. Fra Giocondo’s project for a stone bridge of 1514—one of many submitted at the time—was realized by Antonio da Ponte only between 1588 and 1592.
   Another feature of striking realism in the miniature are the fondamenti or rivi. They consist of wooden planks nailed to sturdy posts rammed into the muddy bottom of the canal. This system of securing the embankments was still in use in Carpaccio’s time; he depicted it in 1495 in the scene of the departure of Saint Ursula and her fiancé in the cycle The Legend of Saint Ursula (Galleria dell’Accademia; see Sgarbi 1994, pp. 80ff.), which takes place in an imaginary northern country but draws on Carpaccio’s visual experience of the Venetian cityscape. The Canal Grande and other larger thoroughfares had stone embankments early on (see Gentile Bellini’s Miracle of the Holy Cross at Ponte di San Lorenzo of about 1500 in the Galleria dell’Accademia), but the wooden fondamenti of the minor canals and rivi were replaced by stone structures much later (see, for example, the engravings by Giacomo Franco of 1610 [Del Negro and Preto 1998, p. 714, fig. 5, p. 718, fig. 8]). During this ongoing process, which included the constant dredging of the canals, innumerable terracotta pellets were excavated that were used in practicing the sport of archi da balle (bows) over several centuries (see Busiri Vici 1963, specifically p. 349n12). Young men are using bows to shoot such pellets at cormorants in Carpaccio’s Hunting on the Lagoon (Figures 7, 8).
12. In the illuminated manuscript of Le livre des merveilles in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (ms. fr. 2810, fol. 14; see Zorzi 1988, p. 30, fig. 15), which dates to about the same time as
Bodley 264, Marco is shown taking leave with his father and uncle (on horseback) in a similar cinnamon-colored outfit.


14. Cogs were the typical vessels for bulk cargo (see Howard 2007, p. 77). A huge cog under construction in a floating dock is shown in front of the arsenal (inscribed armamentarium) in the enormous woodcut of Venice by Erhard Reuwich of 1486 that was printed in Mainz. The Dutch artist accompanied Bernhard von Breydenbach, canon of Mainz Cathedral, on his trip to the Holy Land in 1483. His illustrations are precious factual documents.

15. For a nearly contemporary parallel, see the detail in the fourth of the magnificent set of Flemish tapestries, the so-called Devonshire Hunting Tapestries, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Woolley 2002, pl. 14), where otters, swans, and herons are the game of either hunters, trained hawks, or daredevil children (who try in vain to rob a swans’ nest). Next to this scene is a walled sea-port, connected by a drawbridge to the bank of an estuary, where cogs are anchored behind the crenellated town and a galley is being rowed into the harbor, its alt cabin protected by a precious tent.

16. Even Olshch (1937, p. 132, fig. 8, and pp. 225ff.) disregards it in his interpretation of the miniature.

17. Only in an enlargement of the miniature can one make out what might be the outline of a dark bird with a white neck. Considering the overall dimensions of the miniature, it was an impossible feat to depict the bird more clearly. Presumably Johannes could reckon on the foreknowledge of the viewer. On cormorants, see Brehm 1911, pp. 136–40. Cormorants belong to the order Steganopodes (see Knauer 2003). The term cormorant is transmogrified from corvus marinus (sea raven), first attested in the Latin-German Reichenau glosses of the eighth century.

18. Elke Böhr graciously provided fresh information, citing Schöne and Schmidt 2009. Cormorants are shown in flight and in the characteristic half-submerged position next to the swans’ nest in the Devonshire Hunting Tapestries (see note 15 above). Unlike ducks and herons, cormorants had nothing to fear from falconers, since they were considered unfit for human consumption.

19. See Knauer 2003, p. 36n1–2. The paintings, reunited for a short period at an exhibition in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1999–2000, had already been recognized in the 1960s as being part of a double door or shutter, as the Getty view of the lagoon has on its back a trompe l’oeil—letters pinned to a framed board (ibid., pp. 32–33, figs. 1–3).

20. Ibid., p. 35. Despite the careful study of the symbolic connotations of the objects surrounding the two women by Gentili and Polignano (Gentili and Polignano 1993; Polignano 1993), I doubt the women’s respectability, based on their hairstyles, jewelry, and deportment and the color and cut of their dresses (see Knauer 2002).

21. A butcher’s stall is attached to the Torre dell’Orologio in the depiction of Piazzetta and Piazza San Marco in a painting by Bonifazio de’ Pitati (1487–1533) at the Accademia in Venice (cat. no. 917) of about 1543–44; the explanatory label calls the shop a furrier’s, but the suspended pinkish objects with dangling legs speak against that.

22. The Black Sea coast emporium also served as slave markets; the Genoese at Caifa (Fedoseysa) and the Venetians were notorious for their systematic shipping of young slaves of both sexes and of the most varied races, mainly hailing from the Kipchak steppe, to supply the harems of Islamic courts and to fill the ranks of their armies. The primary recipients were the sultans of Mamluk Egypt, but Italy and other Christian countries too were interested in the acquisition of “infidels,” the women to be employed as house slaves, the men in agriculture and crafts. Already in antiquity the steppe of the northern Black Sea region were an acknowledged source of human merchandise; Strab (Geography 11.2.3) reported that the nomadic tribes of those territories exchanged slaves for clothing, wine, and other Mediterranean commodities. Marco Polo brought back with him to Venice a Tartar slave named Peter. The slave trade was by no means interrupted after the Western merchants had lost their footholds around the Black Sea. Once they were willing to embrace Christianity, the captives could improve their station. See the magisterial work of Charles Verlinden (1955–77, especially vol. 2); see also Origo 1955; Elze 1981, pp. 131–35; Heers 1981; and Günes-Yagi 2007. Before the capture of Byzantium by the crusaders in 1204, Italian traders were a rare sight around the Black Sea because no official support from their hometowns was forthcoming; their activities took wing only after that event (see Jacoby 2007 and Ortalli, Ravegnani, and Schreiner 2006).

23. See Larner 1999, chap. 7, pp. 116–32, and Rossabi 2002; see also Abulafia 2000 and Jackson 1999. For the Latin reports of the monks who had contacted the Mongols in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Van den Wyngaert 1929. The first wave of a devastating disease, the so-called Black Death, was carried from the Kipchak steppe to the Crimea and on merchant vessels to Europe in 1347, rats being the carriers of the bacterium. The loss of lives all over Europe and Asia was staggering and significantly contributed to the collapse of the trade links. The contacts established before these catastrophes, however, prepared the West for the great discoveries of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The East was no longer a terra incognita.

24. Larner (1999, pp. 88–104), despite Rustichello’s “chivalric rhetoric,” sees Marco’s book in the tradition of cosmographical works and affirms that he must have used notes he had taken during his twenty-four years in China when he dictated his Divisament dou monde (Description of the World) to Rustichello. He may have been aware of the remarkable state of mapmaking in China.

25. English translation from Yule (1866) 1967, vol. 2, pp. 189–91. For the Latin text, see Van den Wyngaert 1929, vol. 1, pp. 462–63. For the significance of Odoric, see Reichert 1987 and 1992, pp. 123–26, though he does not discuss the cormorant passage. Carpaccio shows no ties around the necks of the birds in his painting, but cormorants can be trained to disgorge their catch without the cords. See, for example, Salvin (1859) 1972.


27. For the evidence of the practice in the Far East, see the unrivaled study by Berthold Laufer (1931), and see also Kuerner 2003, p. 35 and n. 24, and Larner 1999, pp. 128–30. On Western merchants in China, see Yule (1866) 1967, pp. cxxxiii–cxxxiv.

28. The background of The Deposition, one in a series of ten tapestries depicting the Passion of Christ in the Treasury of San Marco, Venice, based on cartoons by Niccolò di Pietro (ca. 1420), displays the same formation of single trees growing from bare rocks; see Dellwing 1974, pl. 65. For a rich documentation of the phenomenon, see Bettini et al. 1974.
29. See Olschki 1937, p. 226. For the presence of lions or big cats on early maps, one of the earliest being the mosaic map in the sixth-century Church of Madaba in Jordan, see Knaur 1981, pp. 84n16, 85–86n28–29, and Arentzen 1984, pp. 92 (hic leones et leinix [in Arab], 53n95 (hic abundant leones).

30. See Hartt 1940, who refers to the dead tree at the left and the leafy tree at the right of the painting. This is a contrast often encountered in Carpaccio's religious paintings; see, for example, The Flight into Egypt and The Virgin Reading in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (Walker 1984, nos. 240, 242). The significance of this feature remains to be explored. The key passages of his interpretation are repeated almost verbatim in Hartt and Wilkins 2003, pp. 459–61. No mention is made of the Muslim ambience. Hartt suggests the late 1490s as a plausible date for the painting.

31. As attested by early Christian and high medieval cartography. See note 29 above.

32. See Allsen 2006a and Allsen 2006b, pp. 254–60. In antiquity, the hunting leopard, specifically the cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus), was found from Morocco to northwestern India and in East Africa. By the seventh century A.D., hunting with the animals became immensely popular in the Islamic realm and was adopted in China; see also Brehm 1915, pp. 150–56. Since the animals do not reproduce in captivity, they were traded over huge distances together with their trainers. As highly desirable princely gifts, they reached European courts in the thirteenth century; Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, in Sicily a neighbor of the Muslim grandees of North Africa, was among the first recipients. Princes in northern Italy followed suit in the Renaissance. Venice must have seen many leopards arrive as imports from the Islamic and Mongol world. It appears that the leopard was soon perceived as an emblem of Muslim rule by Italian artists. An early example is Marin Sanudo's Liber secretorum fidelium crucis (ca. 1307), in illustrated copies of which a lion is assigned to the Tatars (Mongols) and a leopard to the Mamluks (see Degenhart and Schmitt 1980, no. 636). On Sanudo's importance as a mapmaker and author, see Edson 2007, pp. 60–74. A prime example of studies from nature is Pisanello's colored drawing of a cheetah with a dog collar in the Louvre, Paris (2426), now ascribed to Michelino da Besozzo by Schmitt (Degenhart and Schmitt 1995, fig. 25; reference supplied by Dorothea Stichel). Giovannino de' Grassi provides several other examples, among them the drawings in a sketchbook in the Biblioteca Civica in Bergamo (Degenhart and Schmitt 1980, p. 174, fig. 297, and p. 540, fig. 502). Another is folio 41 in Jacopo Bellini's sketchbook in the Louvre (Degenhart and Schmitt 1990, vol. 7, pl. 50). It seems significant that whenever Jacopo Bellini depicted tethered cheetahs in narrative scenes the subject matter was highly sinister. Several cheetahs are tethered to the wall in the lower level of the building in his drawing Enthroned Ruler Presented with Severed Head in the Louvre (41; Eisler 1989, pl. 88). Since some of the figures wear classical dress, I would suggest that the setting is the palace of the Parthian king Orodos II, who receives the severed head of the Roman general Crassus after his defeat at Carrhae (53 B.C.). Another of Bellini's drawings (British Museum, London, 90; Eisler 1989, pl. 201) shows the flagellation of Christ in a loggia, at the foot of which appears a leashed cheetah. Giovanni Mansueti's Arrest of Saint Mark of 1499 (Fürstlich Liechtensteinische Gemäldegalerie, Vaduz) shows an Oriental "pet," a big cat with a dog collar, in an imaginary structure suggestive of the Mamluk court in Alexandria, and see also his Incidents from the Life of San Marco in the Accademia in Venice (cat. no. 562). Hans Burgkmair the Elder, who traveled extensively in northern Italy and Venice, was certainly familiar with the underlying message: in his Esther before Ahasverus of 1528 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 689), a cheetah is shown next to the throne of the tyrant. The importance of beasts of prey in Islamic hunting is documented on the so-called Baptistère de Saint Louis in the Louvre, a metal basin of the 1260s with inlaid scenes, among them a cheetah on a leash (see Knaur 1984, pp. 173–78). The motif of the hunting cat also appears frequently on Islamic ceramics of the Mongol period. For Western observers the connotation must have been not only exotic but a positively threatening emblem of the Muslim enemy.

32. Ps. 42.1: "Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum; ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus" (As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul over thee, O God). See Domagalski 1990, pp. 122–28 ("Der Hirsch am Wasser"), 129–44 ("Der Hirsch an den Paradiesflüssen"). See also Bath 1992, pp. 222–24, for instances of the identification of the stag with the crucified Christ. I cannot share Hartt's reading of the landscape on the right side of the picture as peaceful.

33. For a competent essay on the political and religious development in Venice of the time, see Rössler 1956. On Gasparo Contarini, an important and representative figure of that reformatory spirit, see Gleason 1993.

34. The nude human figure among wild beasts and birds in our miniature confirms the character of the scene as a representation of faraway Paradise.

35. Amitai and Biran 2005, part 3, "The Mongol Empire and Its Successors," contains a number of excellent studies covering the period; in this context, Di Cosmo 2005 is of particular relevance.

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58


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